



Telling Time

Representations of Ruins in the Grotesques of Sixteenth-Century Italy

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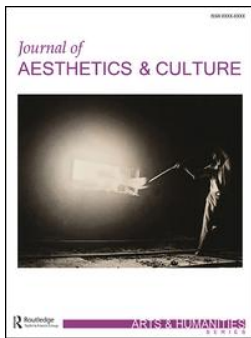
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Telling time: representations of ruins in the grotesques of sixteenth-century Italy

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Abstract

Prospects of ruins feature frequently within the *grotesques* or ornamental frescoes of sixteenth-century Italy. What is at stake in the representations of ruins seems to be at stake on a more general level in the grotesques seen as a compositional device: the visualisation of passages between a form and the formless, or between culture and nature, with change and movement as key concepts. The article addresses how the exploration of transformation, which is fundamental to the representation of ruins in grotesques, is manifested in subject matter, composition, and spatial relations; and how all three are aspects of the telling of time. It is suggested that the prevalence of ruins in grotesques highlights the pre-occupation with temporality as a major theme in the visual culture of the period.



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A fascination with temporality seems to be a common denominator in the visual culture of the sixteenth century. The concept of time was dealt with and turned into images in many different ways, and a plurality of temporalities often coexisted in one single work of art.¹ Here, we shall concentrate on temporality in the sense of representations of the passing of time and of transformation from one state of being to another.

One example of this is the representation of ruins. Defined as architecture in gradual decay, ruins are a sign of the passing of time. They correspond to a historical consciousness, a consciousness of time's past and of a distance, measured in time, between the present of the viewer and the remote past in

which the building was erected and stood intact. As an artificial structure, a building is produced from natural blocks of stone given form, perfected, and delimited by the stonecutter, but as a ruin these blocks are partly reclaimed by nature in an implicitly long span of time, transforming the structure into something undefined or unlimited. Thus, a building in a state of decay is also a figure of temporality through the dynamic interaction it entails between art and nature.

It is well known that landscape prospects with ruins were highly appreciated as an autonomous subject for painting in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, just as artificial ruins became popular as follies in eighteenth-century English gardens.²

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Figure 1. Cardinal Gambara's casino at the Villa Lante, Bagnaia, attributed to Vignola, begun 1566, detail of the frescoes in the ceiling, including prospect with ruins (photo: author).

However, already in the marginal art of the grotesques, so immensely popular in the sixteenth century, landscapes with ruins appear, even as autonomous prospects without human figures (Fig. 1). Such images of temporality, corresponding to a historical consciousness we usually associate with modernity, are, indeed, remarkably prominent within the framework of sixteenth-century grotesques.

The radicality of this is highlighted by the basic but significant observation that representations of ruins, defined as architecture in gradual decay and thus as a sign of the passing of time, exist neither in ancient nor medieval art. Although ancient Roman frescoes often included landscape prospects with architectural elements, these were not represented as ruins. As W.S. Heckscher showed in his important work of the 1930s, fragmented, undefined, and thus implicitly infinite structures were not visualised in art.³ In line with his teacher Erwin Panofsky's early study of *The Perspective as Symbolic Form* (1927), Heckscher observed that the reluctance to represent the limitless or infinite in art corresponded with a general aversion, characteristic of the aesthetics of ancient and medieval art, to the concept of infinity. When iconographic circum-

stances unavoidably demanded the inclusion of a ruin, like in representations of The Fall of Babel, the artists chose to represent only the actual falling or tumbling down of the buildings. Yet the parts of the buildings were shown as intact entities (Fig. 2).

Only very gradually, in the fourteenth century, did representations of dilapidated architecture begin to appear, with Maso di Banco's fresco in Santa Croce, Florence, as a singular, monumental example of its time (Fig. 3). The painting not only features buildings without roofs but also fragmented walls, and even weeds growing in the cracks, thus emphasising the old age of the structures. The inclusion of ruins was triggered by specific iconographical circumstances: the setting of the scene at the Forum Romanum. Among the remnants from pagan Rome, Pope Sylvester renders a dragon harmless by sealing its mouth, while the Emperor Constantine watches at the right hand side. The poisonous breath of the dragon makes the figures in Sylvester's entourage hold their noses. Two men have fainted due to the bad air but are subsequently resurrected by Sylvester. The representation corresponds with observations in written sources of the time that ruinous areas, such as the Forum Romanum, were associated



Figure 2. "The Fall of Babylon" from the Bamberger Apocalypse, c. 1020. Msc. Bibl. 140, fol. 45 r. (Photo: Gerald Raab. Reproduced with permission from the Bamberg State Library). The fall of the city is illustrated by representing the city intact, but turned upside down. The people standing cover their heads with their hands to avoid being hurt by the falling architecture.

with a bad, unhealthy atmosphere, in accordance with their pagan origin.⁴ Correspondingly, in descriptions of architecture, ruins were metaphorically associated with decaying, corrupted bodies.⁵

In contrast to the frail, monochrome, shell-like walls of earlier images of ruins such as Maso di Banco's, the care and significance bestowed by Andrea Mantegna on his architectural backgrounds may serve to illustrate a further step towards representing the passage of time. In several of his works of the second half of the fifteenth century, Mantegna included built structures represented as composed, repaired or rebuilt in different phases, thus turning time into a theme through the corporeality and physical, *secular* presence of buildings (Fig. 4).⁶ The Latin phrase *relinquere saeculum* used to designate people leaving the secular world in order to join a monastic order, illuminates the direct link between worldliness and time. The secular world is equal to the temporal world. The gradual development towards secularism in society and art went hand in hand with a development towards involvement in temporality.

In this context, it is worth noting that the study of ruins and the representation of the materiality or corporeality of architecture in sections and plans began to manifest itself in drawings simultaneously with studies of anatomy and dissection in the last



Figure 3. Maso di Banco, *St. Sylvester and the Dragon*. Fresco, c. 1340. Bardi di Vernio Chapel, Santa Croce, Florence (photo: Public Domain, via Wikimedia Commons).



Figure 4. Andrea Mantegna, *St. Sebastian*, detail of the background architecture, probably 1480s. Paris, Musée du Louvre (photo: Public Domain, via Wikimedia Commons).

decades of the fifteenth century. The investigation into the structure of architecture coincided with endeavours to move beyond the surface of the skin of the human body, in a profound desire for naturalism. Leonardo da Vinci's investigations in drawing, within both the fields of innovative modes of architectural drawing (prospects, plans) and of dissection or study of the human skeleton, constitute a remarkable stage in this process. This interest in worldliness in terms of our corporeal

condition is an important aspect of the engagement with temporality in the period.

In the sixteenth century, ruins still appeared in painting when iconographical circumstances called for them. Typically, the birth of Christ was set in an evidently ancient building, with the notions of the New Law superseding the Old at times even emphasised by the roof of the humble stable built into the ruins. At one and the same time, the ruins could refer to the ancient Roman

past and be legitimised by the narrative of the painting. But the appearance of ruins in painting went hand in hand with the development of landscapes, including perspectives of both space and time and gradually the iconographic context was no longer needed as a motivation for the inclusion of ruins.⁷ In mapping this appearance of ruins as an autonomous subject for art, their prominence within the context of decorative, ornamental painting, typically within the parergonal imagery of the grotesques, is remarkable.⁸

To understand why the imagery of ruins was found to be particularly appropriate here, it is necessary to re-evaluate this kind of ornamental painting within the art-historical hierarchy. Judging from the lack of interest in this field in conventional art-historical surveys, the grotesques may also seem marginal in the sense of artistic, creative, and imaginative importance. Within the discipline of art history, the common, albeit unintended, projection of our modern concept of art onto the past has often resulted in an emphasis on great masters and on autonomous works of art that fit the white cubes of the modern institution of the museum. As a field between decorative art and art in the modern concept of the word, the grotesques have been rather overlooked. In reproductions of *in situ* frescoes, art-historical books (with few exceptions) still tend to isolate the central, figurative, monumental compositions, and exclude the marginal framework and overall spatial context surrounding them. However, from around 1500 onwards, villas and palaces abounded with such frescoes.⁹ The sheer quantity of grotesques produced indicates the tremendous popularity of this art form within the visual culture of the time. Moreover, sixteenth-century writings on art theory reveal that the art of the grotesques was recognised as highly demanding, with claims by Giorgio Vasari and others that only the most imaginative artists were capable of producing good grotesques.¹⁰

The grotesques were understood as a kind of artistic self-representation, based on the inventive strength of the ornament with its eclectic monstrosity, the movement and transformation that it embodied, and, fundamentally, the handling of the line, the handwriting or *style* of the artist.¹¹ The grotesques were, indeed, a field rich in artistic invention where innovations not yet possible or acceptable in monumental art were pursued and

where such innovations could be developed more radically than elsewhere, due to their marginal position.

If we look at the compositions of grotesques, the decorative schemes applied clearly vary from artist to artist just as formal developments took place through the century. But in general the grotesques consist of sequences of figurative motifs, often including architectural elements, perhaps *aediculae*, combined with humans, animals, and plants in hybrid constellations. The combination of such disparate figures, in itself a form of monstrosity, went along with a playfulness when it came to natural laws (Fig. 5). Often, figures of different scale were juxtaposed—such as fruit and human figures—and supplemented with a playful approach to gravity, with heavy loads hanging, seemingly weightless, in delicate ribbons and garlands. A delight in visual paradoxes was a common denominator.¹² Another manifestation of this was the combination of perfectly naturalistic portraits of specific flowers or animals with hybrid, monstrous inventions created in the imagination of the artist (Fig. 6).

Furthermore, the compositions are dynamic by turning art into nature or nature into art. The grotesques consist of sequences of figures evolving or developing into something else, with both hybridity and metamorphosis as essential qualities. This dynamic representation of a sequential process or development is in itself a representation of temporality in terms of its absorption with transformation and change. So what is at stake in representations of ruins seems to be at stake on a more general level in the grotesques seen as a compositional device: the visualisation of passages between a form and the formless, or between culture and nature, with change and movement as key concepts. In this sense, the frequent prospects with ruins in the grotesques are in perfect alignment with the conditions of image-making governing these frescoes in general.

This focus on the ruins as an open, dynamic structure in an ambivalent state between nature and art corresponds with Mikhail Bakhtin's characterisation of the grotesque in his milestone among analyses of the field, *Rabelais and His World*, first published in 1965. He eloquently described the grotesque as constituted by an interaction between the body and its surroundings, by undefined limits and by the emphasis on the openings



Figure 5. Cesare Baglione, “Juggler’s Hall.” 1586–1592, Castello di Torrechiara. The frescoes include ruins both on the major panels of the wall and in the frieze below the ceiling (photo: author).

of the body as zones of passage between interior and exterior, with ambivalence as a general theme and with a special engagement with masks.¹³ As the opposite of the grotesque, and implicitly of the ruin, Bakhtin defined the *classic* images of the body as clearly delimited and thus timeless.¹⁴ The transformational, temporal qualities of the imagery of ruins and the imagery of grotesques are two aspects of the same representational endeavour.

In the sixteenth century, innovative pictorial strategies were developed to engage with the ambivalence that Bakhtin equated with the grotesque. These strategies were related to the representation of temporal conditions such as weather and time of day, sunsets and atmosphere in general.¹⁵ As keenly observed by Vasari, the gradual tones of *sfumato* was a key quality of the *terza maniera* of his art-historical development, also emphasised in his biographies of, for example, Leonardo, Giorgione, and Andrea del Sarto.¹⁶ Prompted by (or prompting) the technological innovation of oil painting, *sfumato* was a means of representing temporality

in terms of movement, atmosphere, temper, and ambivalence, and a way of making a figure appear to be alive and capable of moving, by blurring it, by turning it into something undefined.¹⁷ As a pictorial strategy, the technical innovation of *sfumato* is similar to the ruin, understood as a structure transformed into something undefined by time (Fig. 7).

We have been looking at the representation of time in terms of dynamic interaction in subject matter, such as ruinous architecture in a state of transition between art and nature. Moreover, we have observed how temporality was inherent in the compositional dynamics of the grotesques, highlighting the qualities of processes, developments, hybridity and metamorphosis. Let us finally look at the theme of dynamic interaction in terms of spatial relations. For there was a noticeable preference for grotesques in certain room types in the palaces and villas of the time (Fig. 8 and 9). This imagery was favoured on the walls of galleries, loggias, staircases, and corridors—in general, room types that received considerable



Figure 6. Marco da Faenza (workshop of Giorgio Vasari), detail of frescoes with grotesques and ruins, 1555–1565. Palazzo Vecchio, Florence (photo: author, courtesy: Musei Civici Fiorentini).

attention in the architecture of the period.¹⁸ These spaces have in common their function as passages between different rooms and levels, as well as between interior and exterior. The loggias, favoured in the facades towards the courtyards or gardens, represent intermediary stages, opening with arcades to the nature (i.e. the garden) outside and delimiting or framing the artificial architectural environment inside. Developed as a new room type in this period, the gallery corresponded with a general predilection for long, axial courses, resulting in dramatic effects in perspective (Fig. 9). Such elongated axes, bringing infinity into play as an aesthetic principle, were adopted both in the interiors of the palaces and in the layout of exterior spaces such as gardens, as well as in urban planning.¹⁹ These room types emphasise the movement or passage of people through them and physically correspond to the grotesques as an imagery of movement and transformation, as figurations of a zone of hybridity or ambivalence between nature and art.

The often quoted passage by Michel de Montaigne (who, incidentally, also described his own literary work as grotesques) from his *Essays* (1580s) may serve as an accompaniment to the grotesques and the ruins in their spatial surroundings of architectural passages, as testimony to this consciousness of and absorption with instability and transformation:

The world runnes all on wheelles. All things therein moove without intermission [...] I cannot settle my object; it goeth so unquietly and staggering, with a naturall drunkennesse [...] I describe not the essence, but the passage; not a passage from age to age, or as the people reckon, from seaven yeares to seaven, but from day to day, from minute to minute. My history must be fitted to the present. I may soone change, not onely fortune, but intention.²⁰

The absorption with the flux of the world, so beautifully phrased by Montaigne in the observation “I describe not the essence, but the passage,” corresponds to the fascination with hybridity,



Figure 7. Castello di Torrechiara. Detail of frescoes with grotesques and ruins against a sunset, with a flight of birds, adding the air of a fall to the atmospheric scenery. Late sixteenth century (photo: author).

movement, and change in the thinking on art and nature in the period.²¹

This emphasis on or even cultivation of ambiguity and metamorphosis is evident not only in the imagery of ruins within the grotesques, but in a broad range of artefacts from the period, from the artificial grottoes of the gardens to the hybrid conjunction of natural and artificial objects in the cabinet of curiosities. It corresponds with the attempt to create a so-called *terza natura* in the gardens of the time, and it is, not least, evident in the prominence of rustication in architecture. A palace like Federico Zuccari's in Florence (c. 1577) is a remarkable example due not only to its mixture of well-dressed stone and huge, irregular "natural" blocks but also to its inclusion of panels that look like fossilised reliefs or sections of archaeological excavations, playing on the in-between of ruins and nature (Fig. 10).

Furthermore, the cultivation of transformation, found in both the imagery of ruins and grotesques, points to questions of the power and problems of perception as an underlying condition determining

the visual culture of the period. Although apparently fundamental to pictorial art of all times, the preoccupation with investigating and questioning illusionism is arguably particularly strong in the sixteenth century, as a historical epoch constituting



Figure 8. Grotesques surrounding Vignola's spiral staircase, 1565. Caprarola, Villa Farnese. (Courtesy: Soprintendenza Belle Arti e Paesaggio per le province di Roma, Frosinone, Latina, Rieti e Viterbo).



Figure 9. Uffizi Gallery. Ceiling with grotesques by Alessandro Allori, Antonio Tempesta, and others. 1581. Florence (Photo: Courtesy of the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities and Tourism).

the border between an ancient and medieval concept of nature on the one hand, and the modern one on the other.²² One of undoubtedly countless

historical factors contributing to the new outlook in the understanding and representation of time in the period would be the growing urban culture,



Figure 10. Federico Zuccari's house. 1578. Florence (photo: Roberto di Ferdinando).

involving changes in how nature and technology were viewed. The invention of the printing press is one major example, in which seriality and mechanical repetition developed along with a new systematicism, a consciousness of historical difference, and a focus on style. The development of both the city and the villa went hand in hand with the development of a new objectifying distance from nature. The absorption with transformation and hybridity may point back to older notions of nature as constantly pregnant with images, as expressed in ancient and medieval sources on nature as full of potential figurations.²³ Yet as an imagery of temporality, the ruins challenged the limits of visual representation in the medieval and early Renaissance periods. In their compositional, spatial context within the grotesques they imply a consciousness of historical distance and reveal a remarkable objectivity in the representation of signs of temporality, corresponding to a new technological, scientific approach to the world. In their cultivation of paradoxes and of figurative genesis they constitute a pronounced and highly creative response to conventions of pictorial representation rooted in the ancient and medieval period.

Notes

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experiments with artificial architectural temporality. However, actual artificial ruins did not become current as a feature within landscape architecture until the eighteenth century.

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15. Wamberg, *Landscape as World Picture*, vol. 2, 173–203.
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